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ABSTRACT

Middle Eastern students face cultural conflicts in adapting to the western value system. While feeling obligated to maintain their native culture they also need to feel comfortable with the culture of their target language. In attempting to identify with a new group, ESL students may sense a loss of membership in their native group. Culture stress may arise when individuals reach a state of not belonging to either their native or second language group. ESL teachers and administrators need to be aware of this conflict so they may help these students function in a foreign society. A questionnaire was given to higher level intensive ESL students to ascertain their major positive and negative reactions to adjusting to American society and intensive ESL coursework. ESL students have problems with differences in stress, intonation, dialect variation, social register, idiomatic usage, and conversational strategies. These problems can disrupt communication. In the classroom, ESL instructors need to be aware of Middle Easterners' cultural biases to develop effective classroom strategies. Matters of religion, diet, hygiene, sex roles, proxemics, and punctuality reveal cultural differences and may cause problems that must be handled with empathy in order to ease the foreigner's transition into society. (JK)

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Culture and Language Learning: Middle Eastern Students

Douglas Magrath 1981

ESL teachers need an insight into the problems of acculturation faced by their students so they can bridge the cultural gaps that hinder language learning. Culture stress is particulaly evident in Middle Eastern students as they go through a period of orientation to the western value system. Their reactions vary from total assimulation to rejection of everything western. The following study deals with these problems and suggests some strategies for teachers. First, I shall give a general background of the East-West conflict in the Middle East. Next, I shall discuss acculturation, paralinguistic problems and classroom methods enabling instructors to help their students overcome their problems. My own experiences of living and working in the Middle East have given me valuable information for this study; in addition, I have drawn on the experiences of the students themselves, collecting their comments on a questionnaire given to the upper levels.

Middle Eastern students have already been dealing with cultural conflict in their own countries as the opposing tides of western modernism and Islamic conservatism clash. Modernization in the Middle East created cultural gaps that resulted in " a lack of common culture between man and man, or between man and woman... the gaps between western educated intellectual, the 'kuttab' (Koran school) trained sheikh and uneducated 'fellah' (peasant farmer) were creating schisms in society."(Al-Sayyid p. 193) Early reformers called for expanded education," education by itself in every aspect is a need of human life." (Amin p. 33). Later reformers continued the trend; some even advocated total assimulation of western ideas and values. Taha Husain wrote," We should live the life of the Europeans and follow their path so we may be their peers and partners in civilization." (Husain p. 45)

Contrary to the current of westernization and reform a resurgence of Islamic values took place. Yahya Haqqi, a leading Arab writer, says," There is no science without faith." (Haqqi p. 117) He criticised his people for adopting western sciences at the expense of their faith in Islam. Other writers also indicted the West for its materialism and lack of spiritual values. This earlier trend has continued to the present as Islamic revival movements take place in many countries in the Middle East. However, in spite of the rhetoric and slogans, the rulers of these countries still send their students abroad to study.

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Middle Eastern students bring this conflict with them. They feel obligated to keep some aspects of their culture and religion after arriving here. ESL teachers and administrators need to be aware of these opposing trends of thought so they can help the students function in our society.

Newly arrived students are usually excited about their experiences in this country. However, after the initial euphoria wears off, they often feel insecure and begin seeking out fellow countrymen. "Culture shock for learners produces feelings of estrangement, hostility, indecision, frustration, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, even physical illness." (Brown p. 158) Even after they have made good progress in learning English, students may feel motivated to regress somewhat in order to reaffirm ties with their own culture. They feel caught between cultures and are not sure which one they really belong to. "Advancing toward biculturality in this sense may be viewed as a broadening experience in some cases, or it can engender'anomie' a feeling of not comfortably belonging on one social group or the other." (Lambert p. 179)

Middle Eastern ESL students, as well as those from other cultural groups, may sense a loss of memebership in their original reference group and an increasing identification with the new group. They adopt some of the host groups customs and behavior patterns in an effort to become bicultural. Culture stress arises when the learner reaches a point of not belonging to either group. "While culture shock may pass rather quickly, culture stress may hang on for months or years and mean the difference between health and permanent or long lasting injury." (Larson and Smally p. 42) Language study increases stress as the learners worry about communicating and are forced to feel like children again from a linguistic standpoint.

Students at the English Language Center recorded some of their personal feelings in a questionnaire that was circulated in the higher levels of the intensive ESL program.The questionnaire sought to identify some of the major positive and negative reactions of the students as they tried to quickly adjust to the demands of American society and the rigors of an intensive ESL course.[1] Chart #1 shows the responses of the three major groups at our center. Chart #2 gives the responses of the Middle Eastern students.

1. I am grateful to Dr. Louise Damen for help with the questionnaire

ESL students work hard to master syntax, pronunciation and vocabulary; however, they still face many paralinguistic problems. They experience difficulties in communication because of differences in stress and intonation or a variation in English dialects and idioms. One Middle Eastern student misused the expression, "laid back" in a way that caused considerable laughter. He mistook the English expression for a Turkish word,"rahat" meaning relaxed, comfortable which is an ADJ after the Turkish equivalent of "Be". He left off the second part of the English idiom and conveyed an unintended meaning. Similar mistakes by ESL students have caused others to take offense; the students involved have had no idea of the cause; they have even made things worse by trying to ease tensions.

Social register is a problem for ESL students. They may inadvertently offend others because they are not aware of the fact that our society has numerous subcodes within its system that are not clearly marked. " In linguistically homogeneous societies the verbal markers of social distinctions tend to be confined to structurally marginal features of phonology, syntax and lexicon." (Gumperz 1971 p. 115) For example, a teacher was angered when a student spoke to him in an overly familiar fashion during an exam. The offending student, doubtlessly imitating American friends, addressed his instructor,"Hey Smith!" rather than "Please Mr. Smith" or some other polite form. In our culture, the way something is said is often equal or greater value than the content. The simple command,"Close the door" seems rude by comparison to the polite request," Would you please close the door." The learner may not be aware of the difference in social register between the two commands. "The rules of conversational logic are violable only for the sake of maintaining politeness." (Lakoff 213). Politeness often takes precedence over directness, and the learner may unwittingly offend his or her audience by being direct. " Sometimes a speaker will mute the assertive force of his utterance in order not to cause offense, rather than in order to indicate uncertainty on his part about the veracity of the offered information." (Lakoff p. 217) The ESL student is not sure how to apply this maxim, and he or she may ignore it or even apply L_1 patterns. If the students do apply their own subcodes of prosody and paralinguistic features,they will cause the listeners to infer something that was not intended. " Paralinguistic and intonation contours play an important role in the identification of interpretive frames." (Gumperz 1977 p. 198) For example, Middle Eastern students may appear angry or hostile because of their L_1 features of loudness, stress and intonation being carried over into L_2. " How many foreigners have been thought to be rude and uncouth when in fact they were probably employing an intonation pattern

which had a perfectly acceptable meaning in the mother tongue, but unfortunately had connotations of rudeness in the foreign language." (Wilkins 45-6)

These problems can block communication. The L_2 listener may miss the learner's intention because the real meaning underlies the surface. "The intention behind an utterance is shown to be as important as the denotative informational content it seeks to communicate." (Lakoff p. 222) The listener may get a wrong impression from the learner's speech because the paralinguistic features cause interference. An utterance may be acceptable at the grammatical and semantic level and still be considered impolite or inappropriate because it violates the sociolinguistic rules governing the particular situation. " To know a language means much more than to have mastered the grammatical, phonological and semantic rules. "(Yorio p. 434) Social formulas in Arabic and Turkish provide a good example of conventionalized forms (Yorio p. 438) necessary for various situations. These do not always transfer into L_2. At the same time, the students are not aware of the forms available in English, or else they misuse them. "Conventionalized forms make communication more orderly because they are regulatory in nature: they organize reactions and facilitate choices, thus reducing the complexity of communicative exchanges." (Yorio p.438)

Classroom Strategies

ESL instructors need to be aware of some of the Middle Easterners' cultural biases so they can develop some effective classroom strategies. In this section I shall discuss some specific ares of cultural conflict affecting Middle Eastern students; then I shall make some practical suggestions for improving communication.

Most Middle Eastern students are Muslims. Their religion encourages their search for knowledge. The Koran says,"God will raise up in rank those of you who believe and have been given knowledge." (Koran 58:11 Arberry) Islamic tradition favors education; the Prophet said, "Seeking knowledge is the duty of every Muslim." (Hadith-traditional saying of Mohammad- in Al-Munajjad p.57) Even the most conservative Muslims who come here to study are eager to learn; interference from their religion is minimal. However, a few areas of potential conflict need to be noted.

Muslims are forbidden to eat pork. This rather strict dietary law may cause some problems for newly arrived students who do not recognize it. Any mention of pork or pigs in lesson material should be passed over quickly, and pork should never be offered to Middle Eastern students. They may wish to

know which food term refer to pork; when our students asked about this subject, an Arabic speaking faculty member introduced them to various food service facilities and stores and explained the meanings of the food terms.

Many Muslims fast during the daylight hours for one month a year-the holy month of Ramadan. They may not eat, drink any liquids or smoke during the daytime. Only those who are sick or who are traveling can claim exemption. Students will appear tired and irritable during this period because they usually stay up most of the night in order to eat and pray. Ramadan gives the students a chance to reaffirm their own cultural traditions and values, and it is a defense against "anomie". The daily fast and nightly feast help the students maintain important links to their home culture. Teachers need an extra measure of patience during this period because students may regress.

The status of women is another concern for those dealing with Middle Eastern students. Islamic reformers have done much to liberate women; however, traditional values linger on, and in some cases the rising tide of conservatism and Islamic nationalism have eroded these gains. The result is that male students have difficulty following orders from female teachers and administrators. Female instructors should establish authority from the first day of contact, remaining firm at all times. One must avoid the temptation to shout at the students. Once I observed a teacher trainee shouting at a group of Saudi men; the result was that she lost control of the group which had begun to make fun of her. Teachers need to realize that the students may never have been exposed to a female authority figure before.

The American custom of dating is a mystery to newly arrived students from the Middle East. A few will catch on quickly, and their command of spoken English will improve dramatically as a result. Others will remain aloof and will feel offended by the apparent agressiveness of American women. I know of one instance where a small college had some problems when a student became involved with an under age girl. The student did not realize that real life was not the same as the movies.

Cleanliness is very important to Muslims. They are required to wash before reciting the daily prayers; however, because of the scarcity of water in their home countries, they tend to shower and bathe less often than Americans do. Also, they are not familiar with deoderant; in its place they wash their hands and face with cologne. This measure does not work very well. Apparently the dry climate of the Middle East prevents any problems from occuring before the

students arrive here. My own experience has indicated that a discrete word to one or two individuals is the best way for a teacher to handle the situation. One should never address a large group on this subject.

Differences in proxemics and body language have the potential to cause conflict. Middle Easterners stand closer to one another than Westerners do, and members of the same sex often hold hands or walk arm in arm. Such behavior is normal and does not imply anything irregular.

Punctuality is a problem for students and their teachers; a student may come to class fifteen to thirty minutes late and not think anything of it. Also, any business scheduled for today can be left for tomorrow if not completed.

These are some of the cultural differences that affect the students in the classroom. Instructors should be aware of these problems and develop a sense of empathy while taking the learners' perspective into account. Empathy allows the speakers of a language to apply the correct sociolinguistic rules;"... empathy is necessary for communicative competence. Without some degree of empathy, individuals would usually respond inappropriately to the demands of communicative situations." (Horwitz p. 110)

By helping students communicate with empathy, the instructor can ease their transition into our society and reduce culture stress. Teachers and learners should learn from each other while the class as a whole advances toward the ultimate goal of competence in communication; "...the signaling of speech activities is not a matter of unilateral action but rather of speaker/listener coordination involving rhythmic interchange of both verbal and non-verbal signs." (Gumperz 1977 p. 207) For example, learners need to predict regular speaker change in a conversation by distinguishing between rhetorical and turn relinquishing pauses. During conversation periods learners can practice these paralinguistic skills and review areas of weakness.

Improper stress and intonation can block full communication as much as poor pronunciation. In our program at the English Language Center we have taught these skills through a series of books and tapes prepared specifically to teach consonants, vowels, intonation and stress in an orderly fashion. In addition, teachers recorded dialogues and speaking drills for use with the lower levels. This material is used both in the lab and in class. Stress and pitch are particularly important because the pattern vary across languages. " When we compare languages, we may see that similar stress and pitch sequences function differently in each language...." (Wilkins p. 42)

Other features such as body language, facial expressions and register play important roles in communicating the entire message. These features can be stressed during discussion periods where students can demonstrate various non-verbal communivative systems along with verbal features; at the same time, the instructor can teach the English system including the conventionalized forms that the students will need to know in daily life. Advanced levels can study idioms; several good texts are available that present the most common English idioms set in dialogues and meaningful situations. Lower levels benefit from a study of common expressions and two word verbs set in meaningful situations that can be acted out by the students in class and used by them in interactions with Americans outside of class. Teachers need to choose or develop material that stresses meaningful communication. " It is the spoken language which is used to set out facts for consideration, but the way these facts are stated either locks or unlocks communication channels." (Taylor p.35) Students need to realize that the various subcodes are culturally specific and bound to the context of the particular situation. " Neither the language teacher nor the linguist can afford to exclude from consideration the various verbal strategies and speech protocols which are essential parts of the competence of the speakers of a language." (Di Pietro p.175)

Middle Eastern students face linguistic, cultural and paralinguistic hurdles as they experience life in the West. By remaining sensitive to their culture, ESL teachers help these students make the transition to our society. Cultural subcodes and paralinguistic features should be recognized and dealt with as part of the total learning process, not only for the Middle Eastern learners, but for all ESL students.

Chart #1

Nationality	Problems	Likes
Japanese	language, food, medical, shopping	physical, lifestyle freedom
Arabic	Loneliness, food housing, studying	technology, lifestyle freedom
Latin American	food, loneliness-relationships, medical, studying, language	organization, freedom lifestyle

Comments:

The Japanese generally had problems with practical matters. Many missed their own kinds of food; also, housing and transportation scored high on the list of problems. They liked the physical layout of the United States, and they appreciated the open lifestyle except for one student who thought it was too open.

The Arabic students seemed to feel more loneliness than the others. ; in addition, they were more aware of the technology and freedom of the West.

The Latin Americans liked our systematic approach to things. They mentioned clean cities, organization in general and our educational system. They did not like the high prices for some goods and services(gas, medical care), and some felt that the lifestyle was too free. One mentioned crime as something disliked, another mentioned discrimination.